The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

LEWIS W. BOWDEN

Interviewed by: Robert J. Martins

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[Note: This interview was not edited by Mr. Bowden]

Q: This is Robert J. Martins. I am a retired Foreign Service Officer conducting an oral history interview with Lewis Bowden. Lew Bowden was primarily a Soviet specialist in his career. In my opinion his knowledge of the Russian language was greater than that of any other non-native born Russian speaker. Lew also is fluent in a number of other languages. Unlike many people who are good at languages Lew is also someone who, in my view, has an excellent critical mind. His judgments have always been very well conceived. One doesn't always have to agree with him, but you always know where he stands and know that his views are very well thought out.

Lew, could you give us a little bit of your early life?

BOWDEN: I was born in a little town in Oklahoma called Broken Arrow, which was originally a Cherokee village. About a year after that event the family moved up to Kansas. I basically grew up in Wichita, Kansas. Went through the school system there graduating from high school in 1942. Then I went off to Yale, New Haven on a scholarship and was soon taken up in the V-12 program for the Navy.

Q: That was in World War II.

BOWDEN: Yes. I spent a year at Yale in the V-12 program and then went to midshipman school where I graduated as an ensign in October/November, 1944. Then I went to Naval Intelligence School in New York. In the summer I was assigned to a special detail Naval/Air Force combined secret mission to the USSR to set up a weather station near the city of Ussuriysk to provide weather information for air and naval operations against Japan.

Q: This is in the eastern part of the Soviet Union-Ussuriysk?

BOWDEN: They call it the far east, but there is another thousand miles of the USSR through the Kamchatka Peninsula and the Anadyr Peninsula which comes to the Bering Straits, but it is called the far east region of the USSR and is about 500 or so miles pretty much due north of Tokyo.

The importance of this episode is probably two fold. One, it was my first experience with Russia. As a matter of fact I spent my 21st birthday there. All these things made a tremendous impression on me, particularly because our relations in general deteriorated. This deterioration was reflected specifically in the attitude of the local military people toward our mission. Things got more and more difficult as time went along.

The second thing is that I became acquainted with something called the Foreign Service while living among this mission. Since I was the youngest officer in the crew, the captain designated me as the carrier to transport classified documents between our mission and the Assistant Naval Attachï¿½'s office at Vladivostok. We had at that time in Vladivostok a consulate general which was headed by a man named Oliver Edmund Clubb, who later became quite famous in connection with China. I got acquainted with people in the consulate general and found out what they did and that actually helped me once I went back to Yale to finish up to change the direction of my studies to government, history, etc., away from medical which is where I had been pointed.

Q: You went back to Yale then and when did you come into the Foreign Service?

BOWDEN: Not until 1952. Actually I went on to Columbia University to graduate school; went through the Masters program in international affairs and the Russian Institute. I went down to Washington when I finished in 1950 and got a job in the State Department in research. It was a year or so before I took the Foreign Service examination. I passed it in August 1952 and came into the Service.

Q: Where were you assigned?

BOWDEN: Upon finishing the introductory course into the Foreign Service, I was assigned to Newcastle-on-Tyne, England. I thought it kind of hard to understand why somebody with my Russian background and a couple of other languages, would be assigned to Newcastle which was a dying consulate at that time. In fact, it was abolished about a year from that point.

Before I could get underway I remember a fellow named Bill Boswell in Personnel unilaterally scrap that assignment and reassigned me to the consulate in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, which turned out to be my first post. I arrived there in late October, 1952.

Q: Any particular observations on your period in Zagreb?

BOWDEN: I guess the most remarkable thing that I have to comment on about Zagreb is that I met a girl there who later became my wife and mother of our two children. So that was the greatest thing that happened to me in my first assignment.

It was a good introductory assignment, I think, to the Foreign Service. Actually I spent only a year in it because with the coming of a new President, Eisenhower, a RIF, as usual, was instituted. My job of vice consul in Zagreb, among others throughout the world, was abolished. It turned out there was a position in something called the International Claims Commission in Belgrade to which they transferred me. That Commission actually examined nationalized American property in Yugoslavia for purposes of compensation to American citizens. It was a great assignment because I spent very little time in Belgrade. I was mainly on the road dealing at the grass root level with people who were involved with property all over the northern part of Yugoslavia-where as a matter of fact the fighting has been quite fierce recently, in Slavonia and in Slovenia and on the Yugoslav coast. I got to know the people, the language and customs through this very extensive travel over a period of almost a year.

Q: Did you notice much in the way of underlying differences between the Croats and Slovenians on the one hand and the Serbs on the other, in spite of the fact that this was in the early, strongly controlled Tito period?

BOWDEN: I really didn't. There were things that struck me as superficial in terms of language pronunciation. The Serbs kidded me about my Croatian accent in their language and said they would teach me how to talk correctly. But I had already known so many families with intermarriages between Serbs and Croats, Slovenes and Serbs. I never found this at the time a really seriously problem.

Q: In spite of the memories of the Ustashi going back to World War II?

BOWDEN: Living in Serbia for 10 or 11 months, I never heard this mentioned as a principal subject of conversation or concern on anybody's part. It seemed to develop later and I think it has become a pretext, a rationale, for the ambitions of the Serbian communist party and in particular the leader Milosevic because it had really no importance in public or private discussion during my time.

Q: I take it from what you have said so far that you believe that the differences were not nearly as great as they have become later and that this is not due to the nature of the government.

BOWDEN: Absolutely. I am convinced that the Serbian fear of Croatia has been marketed for reasons known only to Milosevic and the Serbian communists. It is a terrible disservice to have dredged up something like this which in effect blames the entire nation for the atrocities committed by a puppet and Nazi installed government. The emotions which have been aroused over the past year or so in this matter now enter into a kind of vengeance pattern that we are not going to see the end of in my life and probably not for several hundred more years. So it has really been a criminal and irresponsible act on the part of the people who entered into this.

Q: After Yugoslavia you went to Switzerland.

BOWDEN: I was assigned to the Embassy in Bern where I spent three years. The first year in the consular section where I was the only officer and therefore the head of the section. That was a useful enterprise in terms of teaching me something about commercial relations between the United States and a foreign country. Then I spent two years in the political section, which was interesting, but because of the tremendous stability of Swiss politics...everything was predictable with a margin of error of 1 percent...the challenge of analyzing a political situation was not there. I doubt if anyone paid much attention to political reporting on Switzerland.

But it was a pleasant interlude. We had a son born there. I came to appreciate the Swiss in terms of very bourgeois mores and habits of looking carefully after their property and being correct in their relations with people. I also learned their great respect for money and how everything almost in this world can ultimately be reduced to the gold Franc. So there were pluses and minuses from three years there.

Q: Then you went back to Russian studies at Oberammergau.

BOWDEN: Yes. I had applied to go to this kind of Russian high school there for eight or nine months.

Q: An advanced Russian course with all the instruction being in Russian by native language speaking officers.

BOWDEN: From that point of view it was very useful. I got my Russian back after no use for a few years. So I felt perfectly at home when I finally did get to the Soviet Union the following year.

Q: You arrived in the summer of 1958, as I recall since I was about to leave when you arrived.

BOWDEN: Yes, I replaced you. That was an interesting time to arrive. You may remember that when I got there I was taken to the apartment from the airport. I phoned in the next morning to find out when I should report in and was told not to come downtown because the Embassy was surrounded by agitators and people protesting the landing of the Marines in Lebanon.

Q: I recall that I was on the front gate dealing with the crowd. I have some great stories about that. How the crowd wasn't really angry, it was just a put up job. Eventually the assault troops were brought in-they weren't troops they were people dressed in workmen clothes who began throwing rocks through the windows and shooting rifles, etc.

BOWDEN: I should add that later on I found they also threw ink pots filled with ink. They went all over the rugs and walls in the Embassy apartments. This created a big clean up job later on.

Within a couple of days I managed to get into the Embassy and reported for work. I moved into your old job. Incidentally when they did a very thorough search of that building some years later they discovered microphones behind the radiator in your office and mine. They never found out if the microphones worked, but they surely were in the wall and got taken out eventually by security.

Q: No great surprise.

BOWDEN: Hardly a surprise. They were pretty cleverly hidden because the radiator was made of metal and when the detectors went around the room they got thrown off by the metal in the radiators.

I was dealing with internal matters with a guy named Bob Owens. That year from rocking throwing at the Embassy, about a year later we were all at Seconiky Park with Vice President Nixon, who opened the first ever American exhibition in the country...and that is where he and Khrushchev got into the big argument...

Q: The kitchen debate.

BOWDEN: The kitchen debate. That was the high point of that year. Then the following year, the high point came on May 1 or 2 when we learned that the Russians had shot down one way or another the U-2 and had Francis Gary Powers, the pilot, in their custody. I spent from May until the time I left in August, tracking everything I could find in the Soviet press and radio and television about the U-2 and the background of flights over the USSR, etc. I did not attend the trial which started shortly after I left because I was at that time in the political section and the judgment had been made that someone from the consular section should appropriately go under our consular convention to be our Embassy's amigos curiate, friend of the court. As a matter of fact Powers was visited by our consular people and indeed somebody was present at the trial.

Q: During my period, the period just preceding yours, 1956-58, the Soviet Union was a very tight place. It was almost impossible to have any contact with anyone in Moscow. There was a good deal of interesting conversation that I had in trips on the road. People opened up more outside of Moscow. In my period there were ups and downs depending on the international situation. We had the Hungarian revolt, for example, which put to an end the relatively quiescent period after the 20th Party Congress Speech by Khrushchev.This is background but in order to proceed on to the next period that you were there, it was a period when the first exchange program opened up in the Soviet Union. There was ostensibly to be more contacts. One had the feeling that the process was very long and gradual, but about this time there began to be the beginnings of some movement towards a little bit of better access.

Would you comment on this and the ups and downs of that period-the degree to which you had contact and any opinions you might have formed regarding the attitudes of population towards the system?

BOWDEN: The atmosphere was certainly a changing one... Through the exchanges that were being set in motion and was culminated in the exhibition probably. There was a certain loosening up under very tight controls and set of rules. It was monitored, of course, from the Soviet side, but still there was an increase in contacts of all kinds in various fields.

I don't really have any first hand experience of people expressing dissent about the system except possibly, as you were saying, when you got outside of Moscow. Access to the Embassy was absolutely controlled. It was virtually impossible to get into anybody's house. We did have access occasionally through people like Ed Stevenson, who lived outside. He was a newspaperman who had been there for ages and had a Russian wife. It was possible to meet people at his house who were kind of in a halfway world. They had a green light to go there where there was foreknowledge that Embassy people would be there. That kind of contact was where people got their principal information about things that never appeared in the press.

I think probably this whole process of slight loosening up would probably have gone on and pursued its course if it had not been for the U-2. You remember that Eisenhower went to Geneva and Khrushchev came back from Geneva having rejected everything that was proposed in light of what had happened. So the U-2 put a definite stop for a period of time to the loosening up that had been underway.

Q: I had know, incidentally, a Soviet, when I was at the Russian Institute at Columbia, who later came back to Washington as a member of the Russian Embassy...He was identified later as a KGB agent and was caught red handed and thrown out of the country. He called me, I was working on Soviet Affairs, primarily the exchange program, and asked me to come out to lunch. The purpose of this invitation was to, and this was obviously a standard line being purveyed elsewhere as well, say that we ought to understand that the Powers affair would only go so far. He said that there would be a great out cry from the Soviets, they would be making propaganda points and you would be doing the same after all. It would stop after a while and things would be worked out.

BOWDEN: It is true, the U-2 affair drew very strange reactions from the Russians, including Khrushchev himself. We learned, for example, as a result of the U-2 affairs, that the Soviets knew for many years that we were doing overflights. In fact, we were doing overflights in lumbering airplanes like C-54s with open doors through which people would put a camera out and take pictures. Because the Soviets did not have a coordinated radar air control they couldn't actually pin point the aircraft to do any surveillance. They would send their fighters up and look all over the Ukraine looking for these airplanes but never found them. It was frustrating as could be.

Then they revealed that they had been watching the U-2 go over for a couple of years and were unable to reach it with their anti-aircraft rockets. This was a further frustration to them.

Then when they displayed the remains of the U-2 with the photographs it was taking, all the Russians both official and regular public were astounded at the technology of this aircraft and cameras. The Russians had nothing remotely like it at the time and it simply reinforced in the Soviet mind the conviction that the West was technologically far more advanced than they were not withstanding all the propaganda and ballyhoo. So it had a certain sobering and healthy affect on a lot of the policy makers in the USSR.

But they had rejected, you remember, Eisenhower's Open Skies plan. We said that if they rejected it we would do it anyway, so we opened up their skies and were studying their installations. This gave them quite a start when they finally realized the full extent of the intelligence we had available as a result of these flights.

Q: Where did you go after Moscow?

BOWDEN: I came back to Washington to work in Soviet Affairs. After a couple of years working in the State Department in the Soviet area it became clear that there were very few assignments that somebody with my background could have and I started looking around. It turned out that the Latin American Bureau was looking for people knowledgeable in communism because they were afraid that all Latin America was about to go communist. I was one of a number of Soviet trained people assigned to posts in Latin America.

Q: This was true worldwide. I went on to Indonesia for the same reason. This was the so-called peripheral reporting.

BOWDEN: There was also the fact that Personnel had nothing else to offer.

Q: Yes, that is right.

BOWDEN: I went to Brazil and enjoyed my three years there. We spent 18 months in Brasilia.

Q: That was just opening up as I understand it.

BOWDEN: Well, that was in 1961-62. It was developing. Congress had already moved out there, for example. That was my beat. I covered Congress, the Brazilian White House...

Q: But part of the Embassy was still in Rio wasn't it?

BOWDEN: The full Embassy had not been moved up there at that time. We had tremendous advantages over the people in Rio because all week long the Congress and the President and his staff were there and we had access to them because there were no distractions there at the time...

Q: There was nothing else to do.

BOWDEN: Nothing to do except to talk to the diplomats and the diplomats talked to each other. So we were able to do a lot of very good reporting not only on current events but on upcoming things that were just germinating in these people's minds. So it was quite an exciting period.

But then for certain reasons I was sent to the Embassy in Rio de Janeiro where I spent almost two years. So I got a look at both ends. Even in Rio the assignment turned out to be quite interesting because we had a number of people who went on to extraordinary careers, like Frank Carlucci who was in the political section. He was sort of my direct boss and then became special assistant to the Ambassador. Sam Lewis, who later went on to become the Ambassador to Israel. Dick Walters was a military attachï¿½ there and just finished as our Ambassador in Germany. So we had a star studded cast as it were.

Q: It might be well to mention who the Ambassador was at the time and which government it was.

BOWDEN: We arrived just in time for the military takeover. The Ambassador at that time was Lincoln Gordon. Literally before our eyes the government changed...the military took over and President Goulart fled to Uruguay. Later on Lincoln Gordon was replaced by John Tuthill who came from USEC in Brussels and who had never been in Latin America before. He was a European specialist.

The military government continued throughout our three and a half years there. Although they changed presidents, one general replaced another. So it was an exciting period in terms of relationships and what was going on.

One of the things I should remark on about the Brazilian experience was to me the important degree to which some of our senior officers identified with local political forces and parties. You can't fault anybody for upholding the forces of democracy versus the forces of a dictatorship and that is not what I mean. What I am talking about is personal identification with opposition leaders and parties, including parties that were on the record dedicated to the overthrow of the government to which we were all accredited. It seemed to me that some of this had gotten quite out of hand.

On one particular occasion I know because it came first hand that the President was about to sign a persona non grata, expulsion order, on the American Ambassador for meddling in the internal affairs of the country far beyond what anybody found acceptable. He was persuaded from doing that at the last moment because they thought the repercussions in relations with the United States would be long lasting, as indeed I think it would have been. But I cite that only to show the extent of the reaction of the Brazilian President and those around him to some of the things that were going on. It seemed to be going beyond what could be tolerated.

Q: Was there any residual strengths for Goulart after his expulsion?

BOWDEN: Not that I ever discovered.

Q: Goulart had a reputation of being pretty far to the left with some sympathy for the Soviets who had a certain sympathy for him. Any insight on that?

BOWDEN: I think it was the typical picture where any leftist politician in Latin America is going to have some degree of populist appeal and that is the appeal he makes to the people. It goes with a fundamental anti-US feeling. Once you are locked into that kind of pattern, you welcome any outside force to help exploit the pattern and the Soviets were natural and willing partner in this kind of thing all over Latin America. They had never had access to these countries and for their own purposes were constantly striving for access.

The Soviet Embassy in Rio, for example, was fairly large and people were very active in butting their heads against the military government that would have absolutely nothing to do with them.

But you have to look at the whole situation. Not a true democracy in any sense operating...a politician like Goulart who could appeal to the popular dissatisfactions and frustrations which are innumerable in Brazil, to exploit the situation and maintain public favor. I think most people would consider Goulart quite irresponsible.

But he wasn't alone, there were other politicians in Latin America where declarations are almost more important than real things. The one opposition figure that comes to mind was Carlos (inaudible), who was known as an orator with power to sway people with the spoken word on occasions. He was a brilliant speaker. He appealed to the deep emotional instincts of people. As far as I know he never managed to get any kind of a following in Brazil in terms of opposing the military government. He was almost a one man political party.

Dealings with him was kind of ticklish for the Embassy who wanted to maintain contacts with the opposition to the government, but at the same time not completely ruin all our lines into the government with which we had to deal every day.

Q: Any further comments on Brazil or should we go on to your later assignments?

BOWDEN: I don't think of anything at the moment.

I might say that I used the occasion of being in Brazil to visit a number of other countries in Latin America thinking that I would probably never be assigned again in that Bureau because I was definitely considered an outsider and not a member of the club. I was told this very distinctly by those who were members.

So with the family we visited a number of countries in Latin America, finishing with a couple of weeks in Mexico, which I found an extraordinary experience.

Q: You had learned Portuguese very well, as I recall.

BOWDEN: I had learned Portuguese and, of course, we were able to practice it in Brasilia because very few people really spoke English and everyone wanted to have us as company. So we were constantly in people's houses and they in ours. Our Portuguese got better and better. And, of course, with every increase in Portuguese it made Spanish easier. So we were able to get along in Spanish speaking countries as well.

Q: You came back to the Brazil desk. Is that right?

BOWDEN: I was assigned to be the Brazil Desk Officer on the State side. This was when we had the buddy-buddy system with State and AID with a director over both parts. Jack Kubisch was the director at that time and my boss.

There was no future in that Bureau as I had been told on many occasions, so I got a job back in Soviet Affairs which led to the second tour in Moscow.

Q: After you came back into the Brazil Desk job you switched to SOV for a couple of years, I guess.

BOWDEN: Yes, 1968-70. I was on the Soviet Desk in charge of multilateral affairs. I was looking at what the Soviet Union was doing all over the world and interfacing with those parts of the State Department, the White House, the CIA, or other appropriate agency that had something to do with a particular piece of business. It was a fascinating job.

The great disappointment I had during those two years was trying to analyze things and make forecasts that did not completely accord with the current policy. I came to the feeling that it was extremely difficult to think about things because people didn't want thinking. They wanted simply better implementation of what had been decided on and I guess every Foreign Service Officer likes to think he is making a little bit of policy or contributing to policy. But that was a frustrating experience as I had had before on working on Soviet Affairs. The saying used to be that the Soviet Desk Officer on any given occasion is the President of the United States. He is not fully interested in what other people have to think. So I was very happy to be picked to go to Moscow as Economic and Commercial Counselor in 1970.

Q: This of course was in the early Nixon Administration and the opening of China had just occurred. Relationships were gradually beginning to improve between the United States and China which were to culminate in 1972 with the Shanghai Communique. That was followed by an opening to the Soviet Union as well because under the general policy of the Nixon Administration, advocated particularly by Henry Kissinger, the idea was not just to have a China card play against the Soviet Union but to work toward a new Council of Vienna arrangement in which you have five major centers of power in the world and harmony would eventually be established.

This never came about because of various happenings, including Watergate, although it may not have happened anyway. But there was a period later on in 1972 while Lew was there in which economic relations with the Soviet Union became very important and this became I think perhaps one of the key points in your career and your contributions to the Foreign Service...your extremely important role in that period and the follow-up to that in which you went into Commerce to work on these matters and then later worked in to your role in Treasury, sort of indirectly with the Saudis because of the experience you acquired in these joint economic arrangements.

But perhaps I am going too far putting words in your mouth. I am trying to set the tone for the period. Perhaps you could comment on this. You may want to start out by describing the early part of your period there.

BOWDEN: It was clear when we first got back in 1970 that there was a different atmosphere of feeling under the Brezhnev period. Things were opening up a little bit more all the time. This process culminated in a summit there in 1972 where the President and the Secretary of State, Mr. Rogers, and virtually everybody else came and had meetings in the Kremlin. My part in this was actually being assigned to the Secretary, to participate in various negotiations, including the negotiations on the Lend Lease account, without which we knew we would never be able to get any kind of trade agreement through Congress.

The trade agreement which had already been largely negotiated...pieces of it, everything had fallen into place. I personally thought it was a good negotiation which had been led by a Under Secretary General Council of the Commerce Department who turned out to be a very savvy negotiator. That particular trade agreement never came to anything because it had a stipulation on freedom of immigration from the USSR that could not be met and in the final analysis that trade agreement was killed.

Q: Killed by the Soviets.

BOWDEN: Well, actually it was killed on our side by riders which were put on as amendments to various bills which said that the trade agreement could not go into effect until that particular part of the agreement could be honored. And the Soviets could not honor it.

In any event that was a piece of the whole relationship that I was associated with. There were, of course, arms control agreements which had been separately negotiated...

Q: SALT I.

BOWDEN: Yes, SALT I. ...in a great crescendo there during the summit meeting and orchestrated by Henry Kissinger, the great orchestra director. There were military, political, economic agreements. This was suppose to set the stage for this type of harmony among the spheres that you were talking about and in line with the theory that or the hypotheses that the more interconnecting lines we had with the USSR, in which their interest was directly involved, the more responsible they would be as a member of the world community.

Q: That, incidentally, predates Kissinger. It certainly was the view of Tommy Thompson as I recall, and I heard Foy Kohler speak about it when he was Ambassador to Moscow.

BOWDEN: But Kissinger is known also for that and leaned very strongly on that. Probably there is nothing wrong with the hypothesis...assuming other things are equal. Of course things are not always equal. One actually comes to these nice theories about international relations and the theories were destroyed later on, I guess, blown to smithereens pretty much by the invasion of Afghanistan. So it all depends on what overriding imperatives have occurred in a given time.

The one thing that I can recall connected with this whole period is that the atmosphere got positively chummy. At a certain point, I guess it was late 1972, we were making so many knew contacts in all walks of Soviet life that our section at the Embassy couldn't keep track of people. We couldn't make cards on anybody or remember who I saw yesterday. It was kind of overwhelming for the small staff we had to do these kinds of things. That was a very different experience then the one you experienced. Not only was this different in terms of numbers, but the relationship with people had substantially changed. We were able to talk about things that simply had never been mentioned before. We could cooperate and work together setting up programs, for example, and ironing out difficulties. We learned people's telephone numbers and could call in normal fashion. They would come to parties and receptions.

So altogether you got the feeling that things were moving along a good path again from the point where I had left it with the U-2 and problems of the 1960s. To come back and be overwhelmed with this opening up made for a very satisfying three years there.

This was also the period in which there were so many cabinet level visits to the USSR. During the last year I was out of the Soviet Union every month picking up a delegation in Stockholm or London or Paris, etc., briefing them on the way and coming back with them to the Soviet Union. And frequently traveling with them inside the country. On one particular occasion I was assigned to accompany the Secretary of Commerce on his first ever trip to the Soviet Union.

Q: What was his name?

BOWDEN: It escapes me at the moment.

It was getting acquainted with him and his entourage that eventually led to them to offer me a job when I was finishing up in Moscow and was the reason I came back to the Commerce Department. I worked in the Bureau of East-West Trade, which was essentially doing the same thing from Washington that I had been doing at the other end. Except that the jurisdiction of the Bureau at that time was trade between all the countries of the world with the exception of Yugoslavia, which for some odd reason they wouldn't allow to be put in there...Yugoslavia had always been a separate category.

Q: That included Eastern Europe and may have also included China...

BOWDEN: It included China. Within a period of months I became head of that Bureau. The Director went out into private business and he had already made me Deputy Director. So when he left they made me the Acting Director and Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary. I ran the place for several months until they found a political replacement among the Republican ranks to take the job.

Q: How long were you at the Commerce Department?

BOWDEN: I went there in the summer of 1973 and left there in November of 1974, so I was there a year and a quarter.

I actually left for two reasons. One, I knew they had this political replacement in the pipe line somewhere. And secondly, I had some pretty strong disagreements with my boss, the Assistant Secretary, who was, of course, a political appointee. He clearly told me that he did not like the idea of a Foreign Service Officer from the State Department who he considered a spy working among his principal lieutenants. Somehow that indicated to me that my future was not great there, so I asked to be transferred out.

As luck would have it, my wife and I had met the Secretary of Treasury on a trip to the USSR, and he learned that I would be leaving the Commerce Department and about a week later I got an offer to go up to the Treasury Department and head up a new program with Saudi Arabia which Henry Kissinger had set in motion. It was a program that the State Department under legislation could not handle by itself. The Treasury inherited it because the Saudis would not have anything to do with AID. They said it looked like a charity program and they were not going to be a charity program, they were going to reimburse us for absolutely everything that happened. So Kissinger asked Bill Simon to take this under his wing. I think that happened because the Saudis had already appointed their Minister of Finance to head the so-called Commission on Technical Assistance and our Secretary of the Treasury was his equivalent.

So that is how I came to spend four years at the Treasury Department.

Q: Before getting into that and going back to your time in Commerce, this was a period where this joint economic arrangement was set up with the Soviet Union. I recall there was a body set up in New York and there were great hopes that trade would expand with the Soviet Union. A couple of senior Foreign Service Officers were assigned to this as I recall. But eventually under the impact of Afghanistan and a number of other things it petered out. Could you say a little about that?

BOWDEN: I was part of the original group that drafted the charter for the US-USSR Economic Council. It was part and parcel of the Trade Agreement and designed to provide a forum where American businessmen could find out opportunities, sales and purchases that existed in the Soviet Union and since it had equal representation from the Soviets they would be able to provide the information necessary on their economy to get trade and financial activity going.

In theory, I think it was a fine idea. Although, as you indicated, some of the fundamental assumptions never actually materialized. Like the MFN, Most Favored Nation status for the USSR, which probably would have stimulated some more exports from the USSR. It is never clear if you run things like this out mathematically how much difference it would have made. We would have had a chance to find out if the Soviet Union hadn't fallen apart recently.

In any event, things never really got off the ground. There were a lot of meetings, in fact there are still meetings of this Council. A lot of very important people have been associated with it-Don Kendell (inaudible), was chairman for a long time. What they actually do is not very clear. I mean in terms of things that are not done other wise. But I think it was a good idea at the time to really try to get things moving between us in an economic sense.

I have to comment that this is a concept that we had since the early 1930s. One of the reasons for reestablishing relations with Russia by President Roosevelt in 1933, was to stimulate trade and economic energy between the two countries. We had moved pretty clearly into the depression period and it was thought that the USSR would be a purchaser of things manufactured and grown in the United States, and this would help to pull us out of the depression. This is clear from letters that President Roosevelt wrote at the time. And this never materialized due to the policies adopted by the government. As far as I know there was nothing but a steady decline from 1928 to 1948. I have been told the trade turnover between our two countries, if you take the grain element out...the Soviets buy grain when they are not able to produce enough to satisfy domestic needs.

Q: This was a period on the political side where Stalin, going back to the 30s, regarded the Soviet Union being besieged on all sides by a hostile world. Economic aspects flowed out of the political picture as well.

BOWDEN: It did not want to be dependent on any foreign economic source because that would be a source of weakness which could be exploited by your enemies.

So we had this in the early 1930s and again in the 70s. It periodically rears its head. It really leads you to the question if you look at the two economies and trade patterns, are we natural trading partners or isn't that just some kind of a myth that has grown among us and is not very likely ever to be realized. I think that is probably the case. The natural partners of Russia may very well be in Europe and Asia and not the United States. But now it is very difficult to tell, sitting here today.

Q: The Soviet Union hasn't sorted out enough to tell much of anything. Lets go back now to your entering Treasury.

BOWDEN: The exact name of this thing was the US-Saudi Commission on Technical Cooperation. It was an Executive Agreement negotiated between us and the Saudis. Treasury, the State Department, the Embassy and the Ministry of Finance out there were all involved in this. In effect what it led to was a kind of AID program for the transfer of technology from the United States to Saudi Arabia in a number of fields...agriculture, manual training, computer technology, you name it, for which they would foot the bill. They were even willing to fund all the positions in the Treasury Department related to the coordinating role, which was my role basically. But we had 12 or 13 other US Government agencies involved in this program together with a number of private businesses. As the program grew it was our policy to try to enlist the private sector to the extent possible, where it clearly had the resources to do the job rather than put an agency of the US Government into the act which in turn would probably have had to engage private resources in any event.

This program grew from nothing...when I arrived it was nothing but a piece of paper, there was no staff, no program or anything else...by the end of the four years, at the time I left, there were 19 or 20 projects worth about a billion dollars. We had all told probably between 350 and 400 people in Saudi Arabia in various locations doing these projects and here in Washington about 100 people as back up, making sure that the resources got sent and that our people were served and dealing with the private companies, etc.

So it was a big program, an interesting thing. In fact I feel it was the most creative thing I ever did in the Foreign Service. It certainly didn't do me any good in terms of the Foreign Service because, if you look back on it I left the State Department in 1970 and by 1978 nobody remembers that I belonged to the State Department. I had not gone back to the State Department since leaving in the summer of 1970. There is obviously a lesson there, out of sight, out of mind.

There was an election in 1976 and President Carter came in with his new crew and the position that I occupied at the Treasury Department was officially a political level position. Politics had nothing to do with my being there. It was absolutely an accident. I was the guy they knew and thought could do the job and pulled me in as I was also available. But when the new Administration came in, my boss, and I think in general at Treasury the new regime looked upon me as a Republican political appointment, regardless of all my protestations, that was the way it was seen.

So it quickly became apparent that I had no future in that Administration because I felt I was ready to go on to bigger and better things. In fact anything that anybody wanted to assign me to of a non-technical nature I felt quite confident I could handle. I thought I had demonstrated that. But that was not to be because I was persona non grata within the Treasury Department to the Administration. So I looked down the road and said I guess the only thing I can do is go out and get a job in the private sector, which is what I did.

I retired out of the Treasury at the end of 1978 and was very pleased to have my retirement ceremony party in the cash room at Treasury, which is one of the most beautiful rooms in the entire city. It is now used exclusively for official state banquets by the Secretary of the Treasury. It was remodeled and brought into absolutely superb shape when Jim Baker was Secretary of Treasury. He spent a lot of money putting the Treasury put back into beautiful shape and it certainly shows up today. Now nobody would be able to use it for a retirement ceremony.

I have no regrets...it was destiny to make the things fall that way. I don't blame anybody. I can understand, I guess, why the new Democratic Administration would not accept the fact that I was a Foreign Service Officer.

Q: I recall there were a great many political appointments in State too at that time. This is true whenever there is an administration change as well as when there is a party change. This happened after eight years in which the polarity in American politics increased a great deal. A lot of the consensus of the 1950s and early 60s in which Democrats and Republicans had worked together had more or less evaporated under the impact of the Vietnam War and Watergate. There was much more lack of agreement.

I recall in State at this same time period you had a great many of the positions at the Assistant Secretary and even the Deputy Assistant Secretary level that had frequently been held by Foreign Service Officers were taken over by political appointees, or in some cases, people who had been junior Foreign Service Officers, had left the government and come back in a political context. So the changes were vast.

The same thing happened, I recall, when President Reagan came in. I know I was being considered for ambassador to one of the Eastern European countries and it turned out that almost all the positions in Europe went to political appointees at that time...almost without exception.

The same thing had happened in Eastern European assignments when Carter came in. Many of the ambassadorships went to Foreign Service Officers, but they went to Foreign Service Officers who were not connected with Eastern Europe in their previous careers...mainly out of Africa. It was kind of the idea that we don't trust anybody who was there before and we have to get a new batch in one way or another...that attitude tended to prevail.

But to go on from these comments, you did go with a firm that was involved with Saudi Arabia after this.

BOWDEN: I wrote to several companies that had been involved with Saudi Arabia. I made certain in my Treasury job that I had no contracting authority. I could not sign a contract and I really didn't influence contracts at that time. The program that I ran was coordinating, it never had anything to do with the companies I wrote, they just happened to be companies I knew had business with Saudi Arabia and wanted more.

I had three job offers. I took the one that involved going out there to live, because it involved more money and seemed more interesting. I went out with this engineering company as managing director of Joint Venture, an American and Saudi company in the engineering field. We were there for a little over three years. I had annual contracts. At the end of three years it just seemed not worthwhile...

Q: It was a difficult environment to live in for one thing. Particularly for your wife.

BOWDEN: For everybody. It is not an easy place to live. We did not even have the one positive situation of living in a kind of compound with a project, which is virtually the way almost everybody else lives. If you are in that community you are there with 50, 100 or 300 people and form a kind of American town with a few foreigners mingled in. As the managing director I was there alone. I had no relationship other than money with the projects. We lived in an isolated house, by ourselves, with no support services of any kind. So I think we felt even more isolated than if we had been actually living in a project where we wouldn't have been exposed on a daily basis to the limitations of Saudi life.

Q: The other extreme is ARAMCO where I have been. You have virtually an American sequestered city transplanted by itself. Of course there were a lot of in betweens of smaller American companies. I think probably this was more true in the east coast than it was in Riyadh, itself, the western parts of the country, where the presence of American companies associated with ARAMCO for such a long period in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia meant that there was more of an atmosphere over there of allowing the American communities to operate in a more independent manner than they did in other places. That is a personal observation.

BOWDEN: Well, that used to be true, but then you had progressively beginning in 1975 what was called solidization of ARAMCO where the president became non-American and the vice president became Saudi and all down the line. So the ARAMCO compound took on more and more of a Saudi flavor.

Q: I was there only two years ago and it was still very much of a middle America. What you say is true that the senior management shifted, but the need for American technicians or foreign technicians were such that the old institutions continued to flourish.

You had also been over there at an earlier period to help set up the joint economic commission so you were watching the development of this Saudi-American economic relationship throughout its early period. You were able to see the great flourishing of the modernization of Saudi Arabia. Do you have any comments on the degree of change, the impact on Saudi society of this modernization process?

BOWDEN: I am reminded by what you say of assertions that were made during the recent crisis in the Gulf War that with 500,000 American troops on the Saudi desert and on Saudi soil for a period of seven to nine months, that Saudi Arabia would never be the same...the opening up was irreversible. In any event it has turned out that the wind blows, the sand covers the tracks and almost nobody remembers that we had had troops in Saudi Arabia.

It is a big desert country, a third the size of the United States, 99 percent of it is desert. Their ways are ancient, and deeply entrenched. They are founded in the existence of a theocratic state where there is no difference between religion, daily life, law and commercial relationship. You could certainly modernize a lot of things. The big project that my company had to do with was the Jubail industrial city project which involved literally thousands of people building all kinds of things. Installations, desalinization plants for gas and oil, the cleaning of gas, etc. All the things related to oil and gas which is an export of Saudi Arabia. All these things you can modernize. The way ARAMCO had been brought in from the modern world and put down there in a 9th century setting in the beginning.

The great task, of course, of my joint commission was to train Saudis to take over from Americans who had come to teach them the technology so that eventually you would have fewer and fewer foreigners. I describe to this very strongly. As it turns out you have a small population base from which to draw so over any given short time frame it is a big task to train enough people in different kinds of modern industry and services, etc. to man all those jobs that are being done by other people.

Eventually it may happen, but it is going to take a long time simply from the demographic standpoint and the people you can get interested in that sort of thing. One of the things you quickly find out in a society where everybody could be rich if you wanted to be, is that nobody wants to be a worker. Nobody wants to be a middle man. Everybody wants to be a top manager. So it became increasingly difficult to get people to do apprentice type things where you understudy a guy at the middle who is going to teach you the nuts and bolts of the operation. The young guy who graduated from the University of California wanted to come in immediately and be the guy who told all the middle men what to do. It is difficult for the ruling family of Saudi Arabia to resist giving people what they want if they come the good families with educated sons because it depends on those same families and their sons to perpetuate its power down through history.

So there are lots of problems there. You can certainly modernize industry. I don't think there is any great problem with that. But it does not mean that you have to modernize political institutions and political mores to accompany it. There is a dichotomy and they seem to be able to live with it-the 20th century and the 10th century-and it can work out for a long period of time.

Q: After your retirement you have continued to have an interest in Soviet Affairs and I understand you work closely with the Atlantic Council for one thing. If you have any comments on that, that is fine, but otherwise perhaps you might want to look back on the 47 years you have been connected with the Soviet Union in one way or another and make any comments you might care to make on overall, generalized observations of where we have come and insights into continuing factors in Soviet society.

BOWDEN: Let me try to put both ends of this together-beginning in 1945 and now bringing us right up to the present time where I am involved in the Atlantic Council in an ongoing dialogue with the Russians, mainly from think tanks from Moscow, but also from the Russian Parliament, the Foreign Office, the General Staff, etc. So it is a pretty broad range of people we have been talking to. Our talks cover the great spectrum of outstanding world problems. My last three or four years have been involved in visiting the Soviet Union several times and having many, many Russians here.

I think this tends to bring back to me and confirm a number of the early impressions I had as a naval officer and that is that the formation of what we call Russian society and it applies to a lot of the people who have been intimately associated with the Russians for many centuries, has taken place over a period of maybe 800 to a thousand years and that certain concepts and values are very deeply built into the Russian mind which were not erased under communism, are still there as a tribal memory, and will assert themselves in the future, as they are doing now, in ways that are really quite unpredictable.

The principal aspect, I think, that is of importance is the concept of society as a collective and not simply as free floating individuals. Russians, in this long historical period, have always belonged to some kind of community or collective and it is very difficult for them to look at themselves as a lonely and isolated settler in the United States going to North Dakota...

What I was just saying translates into modern terms I think as a very deep and abiding conviction that what we call the welfare state or welfare state of society, is considered a very proper state as far as the Russian mind is concerned. We are already seeing this. In effect, you might say that people want to have their cake and eat it too. They also don't want to pay for very much more. So something is bound to give along the way here and we really won't know where it comes out for a long time.

There is another aspect where the Russian soul rebels against its containment in this collective and community and launches off sometimes into very strange directions. You find examples of this in Dostoevsky, and in all great Russian literature. But in general I think the delineation of future society will bear the marks of this other collectivist aspect very strongly in one way or another.

Q: There is sort of a tension you might say between anarchical ideas and hyper-individualism on the one hand and the need for a collective, part of a bigger whole, desire for an authority to keep this anarchical tendency within bounds on the other. Is that a fair comment?

BOWDEN: Yes, that is a fair comment. You find these days that when you talk to the Russians in general, the thing that they are deathly afraid of is the thing they call chaos. They don't really know what chaos really is, but it means something out there without a structure. In other words, suddenly you are absolutely a free agent, you are free to fail, free to starve, free to die, free to make a million, free to murder other people, and they recoil from this concept in a very strong way. What this can further translate into is agreement to a kind of regime or government or administration which is not fundamentally very democratic. I don't think that is going to bother a lot of Russians that I know. They are going to put a higher premium on other things than the right to choose and reject leaders and policies, etc.

Maybe all this reflects is the fact that to really acquire a working democratic system requires a very long period of human history as it has for us..let's say coming from at least the 13th century up to the present time.

I guess the only other comment I would like to make is that I see today what is happening in the Soviet Union and really in much of Europe and the rest of the world as a period of immense turbulence. The equivalent to the 1918-1919 period when much of the world appeared to be fragmenting, flying apart in all directions and people were desperately searching for some way to try to hold parts of it together or make new arrangements, configurations. And that is true to a greater extent now, perhaps, than it was in the 1918-19 period. It certainly is going to be a much different world than the essentially bipolar world that we lived in for more than 50 years.

Where the Russians and all these other people in the Eurasian heartland are going to come out and find their alliances, connections and natural allegiances and trade patterns is, I think, at this point absolutely unpredictable.

Q: That concludes the interview.

End of interview